Aleksandr Galich: Performance and the Politics of the Everyday

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This paper argues that the works of dissident Soviet bard Aleksandr Galich are best understood as folklore rather than literature, texts, or recordings. Since his songs were censored, live, person-to-person dissemination was crucial to their circulation. Unfortunately, though, the very underground, word-of-mouth mechanisms that allowed Galich to dodge censors has rendered historical record of his performative importance spotty. Drawing on newly-available memoirs, this paper reframes Galich’s songs as a dialogue—with fans, other songwriters, and the Soviet government itself. Rather than a static, linear artist-to-fan relationship, emphasising the social bonds built through oral tradition deepens understanding of Galich’s project, his influence on major musical trends in the USSR, and his contemporary, postsocialist significance.

Most radio stations play love songs. Songs about politics are less common, though not unheard of. But few chart-toppers in the United States concern welfare reform, workplace meetings, or access to consumer goods. These, though, are all issues dramatised in the songs of Aleksandr Galich, a dissident Soviet guitar poet writing from the 1950s to the 1970s. While vastly popular, none of his hits made him rich. They were not played on the radio. No one bought his records. Stores did not even stock them, as Galich’s works were censored. Instead, his songs and poetry spread through bootleg recordings, hand-copied chapbooks, and the simple act of singing and teaching songs to others. Cassette tapes and books are easier to track and study than oral tradition, particularly if furthering that tradition could land one in prison. Unfortunately, this means that the very underground, word-of-mouth mechanisms that allowed Galich to dodge censors have also rendered historical records of his performative importance spotty. In the last decade, however, new memoirs both about Galich and the ‘songwriter’s song’ genre (avtorskaia pesnia) in which he wrote have been published. Drawing on these newly-available sources, I argue that Galich’s work is best understood as a dialogue—with fans, other songwriters, and the Soviet government itself. His work has been analyzed in terms of its literary merit, musical qualities, and political fallout, but there has been limited scholarly attention in the West to Galich’s work as folklore.1 In order to reframe

his music as oral tradition, I first trace the political climate influencing his work, then describe the relationships between Galich, a larger folksong movement, and the Soviet state in terms of circulation, subversion, and repression.

**Political climate: ‘Fairy godmothers of censorship’**

Aleksandr Galich began his career as a Soviet dramatist and scriptwriter. In addition to well-received dramas, he wrote or co-wrote eight screenplays.² He formally trained as an actor, considered screenwriting his vocation, and composed popular official songs throughout the 1950s and 1960s.³ He did not publish poetry during this time, but letters he wrote to his young daughter, Aleksandra Arkhangeskaia (Galich) are peppered with affectionate poems.⁴ While his music left the most lasting impressions both on the public and Soviet authorities, Aleksandra Arkhangeskaia claims that he was most proud of his fiction. One of his completed novels, *Again about the Devil (Eshcho raz o cherte)*, has never even been found. She hopes that it will someday be recovered, reminding readers of Bulgakov’s maxim that ‘manuscripts don’t burn’.⁵

By all accounts, he was a success in the official literary establishment. Then, as one Soviet critic writes, he “went astray.”⁶ In the Soviet era, all music published or performed had to be approved. Singers worked off of vetted repertoire sheets for concerts.⁷ Lyrics such as ‘the fairy godmothers of censorship’ and ‘what are we proud of, bastards!’ got Galich kicked out of the Soviet fold.⁸ He claimed, ‘I was a successful playwright, a successful scriptwriter, a successful Soviet lackey. And I understood that I couldn’t do it anymore. That I needed, at last, to speak with my full voice, to speak the truth’.⁹ The truths of life, for Galich, laid outside official circulation.

Following Galich’s death in 1977, the Soviet periodical *Nedelia* speculated that he had abandoned his literary career due to moral crisis: ‘It happened at the beginning of the 1960s, when he practically quit all literary work and began composing and performing semi-criminal (*polublatnie*) songs with a guitar’.¹⁰ But Galich did not voluntarily give up his writing career. He was expelled from the Union of Writers in December 1971 and from the Union of Cinematographers later that year.¹¹ The most serious charge leveled against him.
was that he had not disavowed a bootleg copy of his songs published in Frankfurt in 1969.  

Galich also butted heads with authorities over one of his plays, *A Sailor’s Rest* (*Matrosskaia tishina*), which depicts a Jewish family’s ordeals during World War II. A Soviet official who Galich only refers to as ‘Sokolova’ was in attendance at the fourth public performance of the play. After it was over, she exclaimed, ‘That’s all false! Not one word is true, not one word!’ Galich then shouted back, ‘Idiot!’ (*dura*).  

Future performances of *A Sailor’s Rest* were prohibited shortly after this less-than-diplomatic exchange. When Galich met privately with Sokolova, she explained her rationale for banning the play in starkly anti-Semitic terms: ‘Well, Comrade Galich, so you want, in the middle of Moscow, in a new central theater, that there should be a play saying that Jews won the war?’ His disappointment at the banning of his play disabused him of daydreams about wide-ranging social reform in the post-Stalin era. He expressed his frustration with the lack of fundamental change in the autobiographical work, *A Dress Rehearsal* (*General’naia Repetitsia*): ‘…after the 20th Party Congress and Khrushchev’s exposure of Stalin’s crimes … again we believed! Again we, like sheep, joyfully bleated and rushed onto the green grass—which turned out to be a stinking swamp!’

Galich fought to regain his position in the Unions of Writers and Cinematographers, not least because he could not make a living without state sanction. In a letter to the Unions in January 1972, he explained that he had performed his songs openly until told not to and asked why his ability to work had been taken away from him. One wonders if Galich would have devoted as much time as he did to singing if he had been allowed to keep publishing. He was backed into a corner from which he could do nothing but criticise. The closing lines of his letter were, ‘I have lost my literary licenses, but an obligation remains—to compose my songs and sing them’. 

And this he did. Galich argued, ‘When a song is good, everyone sings it and the author is gradually forgotten’. For many, this prophesy was realised. Olga Karpushina wrote, ‘Despite the influence and importance of his works, Galich remained a marginal figure among the bards, a lonely peak at the periphery of the mountain range’. One reason for this is that Okudzhava and Vysotsky were allowed to officially record some music. Okudzhava never strayed far from the party line, and Gerald Stanton Smith, scholar of guitar poetry, dubbed Vysotsky, ‘the unofficial bard of the official word’. The form of his songs, not the content, kept them from publication. The establishment may have been willing to forgive

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14 Ibid., p.169. ‘Vy chto zhe khozite, tovarishch Galich, chtoby v tsentre Moskvy, v molodom stolichnom teatre shel spektakl’, v kotorom passkazyaetais, kak evrei voine vyigrali?!’

15 Ibid., p.13. ‘...posle dvadtsatogo s’ezda KPSS i razoblachenii Khrushchevym prestuplenii Stalin…O opiat my poverili! Opiat my, kak barany, radostno zableiali i rinulis’ na zelenuiu travku, kotoraiia okazalas’ voniuchei top’iu.’

16 Aleksandr Galich, ‘Otkrytuye pismo,’ p.558. ‘U menia otniaty moi literaturnie prava, no ostalos’ obiazannosti—sochinat’ svoi pesni i pet’ ikh.’


18 Karpushina, ‘At the Intersection of Genres,’ p.20.

19 Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings*, pp.111 & 154.

20 Ibid., p.173.
Vysotsky’s unprintable, profanity-laced jabs because he addressed prison life and social ills obliquely. Galich, on the other hand, targeted sitting Soviet leaders. With the exception of his early pro-Communist ballads, Galich was always and completely an underground artist. Dissident Leonid Plyushch claimed that his seriousness also set him apart from other guitar poets: ‘Galich wasn’t infantile. We had a lot of infantile bards—I won’t say who. I love them, those bards, but to me [their songs] all seemed like the infantile songs of adults. But Galich sang grown-up songs as if they were from children’.

Two of Galich’s most explicitly political songs, ‘Night Watch’ and ‘Stalin’, react as much to Khrushchev as to his predecessor. In ‘Night Watch’ Galich urges vigilance to prevent a return to terror. The song repeats one of Stalin’s famous slogans, that ‘security organs will “beat, beat, and beat again” the class enemy’ to point explicitly to the leader. In ‘Stalin’, written in 1962, Galich mockingly compares Stalin to Jesus Christ. Khrushchev, though, is the satirical target. One of the final sections of the poem refers to Khrushchev’s 1956 ‘secret speech’ at the Twentieth Party Congress, in which he frankly outlined Stalin’s atrocities. Even six years after the speech became common knowledge, even in the comparatively relaxed ‘Thaw’ years of the 1960’s, calling Stalin a bastard took nerve:

[He] finished off his cucumber
And his speech in torture:
‘And it turns out our Father was
A bastard, not a father.’
Well, that takes the bloody cake!

Galich said directly what most feared to discuss publicly. As he phrased it to the Unions of Writers and Cinematographers after his dismissal, ‘I talked about what hurts anyone and everyone here, in our country, and I said it openly and clearly’. One hushed topic was the number of people incarcerated, even after the secret speech. In his autobiography, Plyushch said that listening to Galich comforted him because his songs acknowledged the exiled and imprisoned. It validated his version of reality. He wrote,

The songs of Vladimir Vysotsky and Alexander Galich came to the rescue … When Galich uses argot and themes from criminal songs, he reflects the fact that the Soviet Union is riddled with labor camps and prisons. The entire country is under police surveillance, and every citizen is in relation to the militia and the KGB in a way similar to the thief’s relationship with the militia.
Galich may have written for ‘anyone and everyone’, but only highly educated listeners would be able to catch all of his references. For example, one meaning of the song ‘We’re No Worse than Horace’ (‘My ne khuzhe Goriatsia’) celebrates samizdat: ‘Erika [a mimeograph machine] churns out four copies/ That is all!/ And that is enough’. The lyrics contain no other reference to Horace. Galich chose the title because the song was a response to one of Pushkin’s poems about the endurance of poetry, ‘Exegi monumentum’, which is itself an answer to Horace’s ‘The Poet’s Immortal Fame’. Horace’s poem begins, ‘Exegi monumentum aera pernnius’ (‘I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze’). The poems of both Pushkin and Horace argue that poets achieve immortality through their art. In ‘We’re No Worse than Horace’, Galich challenges elitism, claiming that a single photograph, samizdat text, or magnitizdat recording is equal in stature to the works of any great poet. Galich sees poetry’s message, mimeographed by a chain of carriers, as more important than individual glory:

Untruth roams from field to field
Sharing notes with neighboring Untruths
But sotto voce voices ring out
What’s read in whispers thunders

Galich did not rise to prominence just because his songs were subversive. He was popular because they were excellent. His densely spun allegorical webs, puns, and allusions inspired people to copy them, learn them, and teach others.

**Circulation: student song, tourist song, do-it-yourself song**

During the Khrushchev era there were three main mechanisms for the distribution of unsanctioned material: word-of-mouth, samizdat (self-made printed copies), and homemade music recordings. The widespread availability of tape recorders beginning in the 1960s allowed inexpensive distribution of bootleg music on tape. These black market copies were called magnitizdat, from the Russian words for tape recorder, magnitofon, and publishing, izdatel’stvo. Magnitizdat freed guitar poetry from the slow, time-consuming process of learning songs in person. Cassette tapes could reach a large audience quickly, and the listening public did not have to be musically inclined themselves to pass along the songs. These technological advances were so crucial to the launch of avtorskaia pesnia (songwriter’s song) that magnitizdat became synonymous with guitar poetry even though people traded all kinds of material this way—from the Beatles to books on tape. As a result,

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27 I owe this observation to Paul Friedrich’s lecture on Pushkin’s intellectual roots. Class notes, World Lyric Poetry, University of Chicago, April 8, 2008.

28 Galich, *Kogda Ia vernus*, p.170. ‘Brodit Krivda s polosy na polosu./ Delit’ sia s sousedkoi Krivdoi opyтом./ No gremit napetnoe vpolgolosa./ No grudi prochitannoe shepotom/’ Adapted from the translation of Rosette Lamont, ‘Horace’s Heirs,’ p.222.


there is a synecdochic association between avtorskaia pesnia and magnitizdat. The part, avtorskaia pesnia, has come to stand for the whole of underground recordings. Another implication of this conflation of genre and medium is that magnitizdat has overshadowed performance as a method of circulation for avtorskaia pesnia.

Since Galich only gave one public concert in the USSR, his music reached others via samizdat and magnitizdat. But people also learned of his work from amateur guitar strumming at private apartment concerts, in dorm rooms, and on commuter trains. Avtorskaia pesnia was not a static, urban phenomenon confined to magnitizdat listening parties in Moscow kitchens—though it was that, too. Outdoor recreation, and the interpersonal mingling it fostered, proved extremely important to the circulation of songs and poetry. After Stalin’s death there was an upsurge in outdoor activity of all kinds: hiking, camping, sports. People had ‘missed socializing’ under his repressive regime. More people also took up camping after WWII because domestic travel had become easier. At the end of the 1950s, students began holding campouts attended by hundreds of people. Informal concerts were standard at all these events. In the first print mention of ‘student song’, Muzikal’naia zhizn (Musical Life) reported in 1959, ‘In our country there is no university or institute where students don’t compose their own songs ... Songs are the constant companions (sputnik) of students; one hears them on campouts (v turistskom pokhode), at holiday parties at institutes, in train cars, and in dorm rooms’. The author of this article also refers to this genre of songs as ‘road’ and ‘travelling’ songs (dorozhnie and putevye), highlighting the links between folksong and travel.

The Russian word turizm denotes outdoor activity of all kinds, whether local hiking and camping trips or long-distance mountain-climbing excursions. It does not mean ‘tourism’ in the English sense of sight-seeing. Turistskaia pesnia, tourist song, arose as a result of such gatherings. Lebina and Chistikov write that ‘the guitar became the symbol of the tourists (touristy)’. The link between outdoor culture and amateur songwriting is even reflected in the songs’ subjects, which were often about camping, diving, and mountain climbing. Igor Karimov, who would go on to organize much of the amateur singing activity in the Moscow region, first learned of ‘student song’ on hiking excursions in 1955, when he was eleven years old.

There I became acquainted with Sem Shagalov. This indefatigable (neugomnyi) person went hiking on every free day (and we went on Sundays) and always brought to our

35Daughtry, Intonation of Intimacy, p.118.
36Lebina and Chistikov, Obivatel’ i reformy, p.288.
new group new songs—and the songs we, of course, sang on the commuter train and, of course, loudly.38

Karimov later travelled widely in the USSR, bringing a good many new songs back to his clutch of Moscow enthusiasts. In his memoirs, he describes how music circulated via such trips:

In the winter of 1966 I went to the Caucuses, to the mountain camp ‘Alibek’, to go skiing. But skiing was not important, what was important were songs, songs, songs. There I heard ‘In a Neutral Zone’ by Vysotsky, ‘Clouds by Galich, and ‘To the Campfires’ by Vizbor. My handwritten songbook—and it was plenty big—I took with me everywhere, and I was glad that it was needed.39

Not all the participants in the musical movement of the 1960s were turisty, though. Not all were students, either, and even fewer felt comfortable with the high-culture connotations of avtorskaia pesnia (songwriter’s song) or bardovskia pesnia (bard song). So there was some confusion about what this new crop of guitar-toting youth should be called, since neither tourist, student, songwriter, or bard accurately described them. According to Karimov, in 1967 a group of songwriters gathered at a conference in Khotkogo, outside Moscow, in part to settle on an inclusive name. Galich and other stars of the folk scene, including Yulii Kim, Ada Iakusheva, Viktor Berkovskii, and Yurii Kukin, attended this first, formative meeting. At that time Galich was nearly 50 years old, so his reputation and gravitas made an impression on the twentysomethings organizing it. ‘But bigger than anyone—majestic, grown-up compared to the rest of us—Aleksandr Galich with his “Karaganda” and other songs somehow kind of scared us’, recalled Karimov.40 Galich reportedly wanted to name the genre after his favorite brand of sausage (liubitel’ sakia, which also puns on the Russian word for love, liubov), but samodeiatel’naia pesnia, literally ‘do-it-yourself song’, won out. The ethic of, ‘I do it myself, I sing it myself’(‘sam delaui, sam poiui’) countered the Soviet publication process, in which nothing could be produced independently.41 The Moscow region group was thus called Klub Samodeiatel’noi Pesni (Club of Do-it-yourself Song), abbreviated KSP. While this was the first KSP organization, they soon spread across the Soviet bloc.

Information about KSP gatherings, or sleti,42 was passed via word of mouth because unsanctioned songs were not, strictly speaking, allowed to be sung. Tonya Hovonova, now living in the U.S., remembers Moscow-area KSP events as conducted ‘in secret, [you were told] what train you should take and where you should go. Then you walk on for a long

38Karimov, Istoriia Moskovskogo KSP, p.17-18. ‘Zdes ia poznakomilsia s Semom Shagalovym. Etot neugomnyi chelovek khodil kazhdyi vykhodnoi den’ (a my khodili cherez voskreseni’e) i postoianno prinosil v nashu gruppu novie pesni—a pesni my peli obizazatel’no v elektrichke i obizazatel’no gromko.’

39Karimov, Istoriia Moskovskogo KSP, p.47. ‘No lyzhi ne glavnoe—a glavnoe—pesni, pesni, pesni... Tam ia uslishal “Na neitral’noi polose” Vysotskogo, “Oblaka” Galicha, “Kostromu” Vizbora. Moi rukopisnyi sbornik pesen—a on uzhe byl dovolno obemnyi—vse vremia khodil po rukam, i mne nравilos’, chto eto vsem nuzhno.’

40Karimov, Istoriia Moskovskogo KSP, p.55. ‘No bol’she vsekh, val’azhnyi, vzroslyi po sravnien’iu so vsemi nami Aleksandr Galich so svoei “Karagandoi”, ot kotorikh stanovilos’ kak-to dazhe strashno...’

41Ibid.

42Slet is a slang term which comes from the word sletat’ sia, to gather or congregate, often used to refer to flocks of birds.
while, and then you come to a place and they sing songs, things like that'.

**Subversion, Cooption, and Cooperation**

Blocking publication of a novel (or taking it off shelves) requires different techniques than interrupting the musical equivalent of Chinese whispers. If concert venues and recording contracts were easy for the Soviets to control, spontaneous singing was decidedly less so. *Samodeiatel’naia pesnia* was a leisure activity rather than a profession. Suppressing a fluid social practice requires people-based, action-oriented responses. Censors therefore used interpersonal, not just institutional, mechanisms. For instance, informants had to be present at *sleti* (gatherings) in order to discover subversive material in the first place. While far from impossible, this did require more infiltration effort than attending public concerts. Like dinner parties, *sleti* were semi-private spaces. This is why songs like those of Galich were, and could be, sung there. Karimov notes that his peers sang different songs on commuter trains and around campfires. One venue was public. The other was a place for ‘our own’ (*svoi*) music. The vast majority of even campfire songs, though, were politically innocuous. Ridding folksong repertoires of only some songs required both outright oppression and cultural cooption.

Writing of similar artistic struggles, Anna Szmere outlined two processes of rock music cooption in socialist Hungary: de-politicization and re-politicization. In de-politicization, a musical style, embedded in a community, is copied and distributed through channels controlled by the state rather than the musicians. This removes the art form from its political context, sanitizes it, and locates production at manageable nodes. Re-politicization then brings an aesthetically popular style in line with mainstream beliefs. In the case of *samodeiatel’naia pesnia*, de-politicization funneled activity into clubs run by the Soviet youth organization, the Komsomol. By providing performance space, administrative support, and funding, the Komsomol encouraged enthusiasts to work through existing structures. Moscow clubs were even lent 40 buses to transport young people to a *slet*.

Re-politicization, on the other hand, pushed ideologically acceptable alternatives within the amateur music movement. Valentin Vikhorev, a St. Petersburg songwriter, recalls that ‘all contests, festivals, and concerts were conducted under [Komsomol] direction…they

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46Anna Szmere, cited in Deanna Campbell Robinson et al., *Music at the Margins: Popular Music and Global Diversity*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, p.77. ‘Without an appropriate amount of space and freedom for music activities to be structured, on the grassroots level at least, by fans and musicians themselves, the music becomes vulnerable and corruptible, politically and commercially alike. The control exercised over the production, dissemination, and use of pop and rock music in socialist societies, has involved the hegemony’s attempts to isolate the sound or the idiom—once co-opted—from a set of extramusical and contextual elements constituting rock as a distinctive cultural practice. The underlying intention, even if not the result of such intervention, is decontextualization, through which the music, due to the indeterminacy of its meaning as a non-representational form of communication, becomes capable of functioning either as conventional entertainment (de-politicization) or, in the case of more offensive state policies, of serving as a “spoonful of sugar” to help the ideological medicine go down (re-politicization).’
had enough sense not to forbid it’. The state imposed licensing procedures for events, banned songs, and stacked contest judging panels. It supervised *samodeiatel’naia pesnia* just as it regulated all music, movies, and printed work, but we should not assume that this stripped the genre or KSP festivals of their subversive qualities. Rachel Slaymon Platonov argues that KSP participants underestimated the role of the KGB in managing *samodeiatel’naia pesnia*. She cites an interview with KSP member Sergei Sinel’nikov, who said, ‘They let us sing, and that was good!’ as evidence for the ‘naïve’ outlook of folksong fans. But since there were concrete consequences for performing unapproved songs, ranging from notes in one’s personnel file to deportation, it is unlikely that participants were unaware of KGB involvement. Songwriter Yulii Kim, for example, was placed under surveillance, stopped from performing, and dismissed from the mathematics department of Moscow State University because of his music. In light of the obstacles to circulating *samodeiatel’naia pesnia*, we should take seriously Sinel’nikov’s assertion that being allowed to sing was itself valuable.

The relationship between *samodeiatel’naia pesnia* and state regulation was complicated, in part because of the Russian maxim, ‘forbidden, but possible’ (‘nel’zia, no mozho’). The Moscow group did not have Komsomol approval to meet, but they did anyway. There were no concerts licensed, but these continued without interruption. Folk music fans took advantage of available institutional perks without necessarily heeding Komsomol proscriptions, especially as these were never explicitly stated. No one said, ‘You can have these busses, but only if you promise not to sing Galich songs’. State-supported or no, the highly-organized KSP clubs helped spread Galich’s music. Fourteen of his songs were among the most popular 150 at Moscow region gatherings from 1964-1967, according to an exhaustive list kept by Karimov. Amateur musicians took the time to learn and re-perform songs not only among groups of friends, but in other parts of the USSR. There is evidence of KSP exchange between Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, and parts of Ukraine, and the social networks created via the clubs may have been even more wide-ranging given the convergence between *samodeiatel’naia pesnia* and tourism. Galich’s high-profile participation in the amateur songwriting scene, in turn, influenced the course of the genre—though not always for the better, from the perspective of those dodging KGB narks.

Rather than being divided into strict ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ spaces, avenues of censorship and circulation overlapped, parasitic on each other. Between 1964 and 1967, Karimov listed Galich as one of his favorite singers even though he was a Komsomol officer and disagreed with many of Galich’s positions. ‘It was because of my Komsomol upbringing,’ he wrote, ‘I was only able to understand Galich … much later’. If the Thaw years were still a ‘stinking bog’ for Galich, they nonetheless gave Karimov’s generation freedom and access to information unthinkable under Stalin’s rule. This allowed Karimov to make decisions impossible only a few years before. In 1966, he applied for and gained admittance to the Communist Party. He chose not to join, though, because the member who

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50Vsesoiuznyi Leninitski kommunicheskii Soiuz Molodezhi, Tsentr’nyi Komitet, No. 01/185s 29 March 1968. Sekretno, TsK KPSS, reprinted in Kushak, Antologia satiry i iumora, pp.549-556.
51Karimov, Istoriiia Moskovskogo KSP, p.81.
52Ibid., pp.63-75.
53Ibid.
54Ibid., pp.90-91. ‘…eto vo mne skazyvalos’ komsomol’skoe vospitanie—symel poniat Galicha … ia mnogo pozhe.’

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sponsored his application relayed Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s brutality. After he graduated from college, the KGB also offered him a cushy job—if he stopped associating with the politically suspect KSP crowd:

Much later, in 1971, I got a proposal to work in the KGB in the capacity of a radio engineer (a good half of the senior class at our institute worked there). Immediately—money, more that I’d dreamed of, title, etc. But the conditions were: I had to join the Party and—quit all business with KSP. This is where sin lurks—I wanted the money, and the prosperity, and interesting work, but freedom is the best blessing of all, and I said: NO.55

This statement indicates the importance samodeiatel’naia pesnia held for Karimov. But he was not a rebel; he just loved music. Karimov may have turned down the Party and the KGB, but he was still willing to make sacrifices to stay off their radar. He supported the Moscow KSP club’s decision not to send anyone to a nationwide festival in 1968 because they wanted to ‘stay clean’.56 ‘It was clear that the event would be scandalous,’ he wrote, ‘and our club was waiting for approval from the city commission of the Komsomol, and we did not want to “sully ourselves”, fall into disgrace’.57 At this festival, Galich gave his first—and last—public concert in the USSR.

Repression

The beginning of the end of Galich’s official literary career came in 1968 at the All-Russia Bard Concert in Akademgorodok. Over two thousand people from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Krasnaiarsk, Tomsk, and elsewhere gathered for this three-day festival.58 Chiefly because of Galich’s explosive performance, this event, more than any other, shaped samodeiatel’naia pesnia events for the next twenty years.59 Participant Sergei Chesnokov recalled that the audience ‘did not expect such words; they couldn’t listen. They did not suppose it was possible’.60 While singing ‘In Memory of B. L. Pasternak’, Galich let the angry affront, ‘And what are we proud of, bastards’ (‘Do chego zh my gordimsia, svolochi”) trip casually off his tongue.61 After the song was over, everyone in the concert hall went chillingly silent for a long while, then stood up in riotous applause.62

55Karimov, Istoriia Moskovskogo KSP, p.47. ‘Mnogo pozhe, v 1971 godu, menia priglasili na sobesedovannie i predlozhili rabotat’ v NII KGB, v dolzhnosti radioinzhenera (tam rabotala dobraia polovina vypuska nashego instituta). Srazu—den’gi, kotorie i ne snilas”, zbanie I t.d. No uslovie: nado vstupit’ v partiiu i —brosit” vse dela v KSP. Chego grekha tait—khotelets’ i deneg, i blagopoluchia, i interesnoi raboty, no… svoboda—ona luchshe vsekh prochikh blag, i ia skazala: NET.’
56Ibid., p.80.
57Ibid. “Ved” bylo iasno, chto meropriatie budet skandal’nym, a my zhdali utverzhdenia nashego kluba gorkomom i ne khoteli, ‘zamarat’ sia”, vlast’ v nemilost’.
59The Academgorodok concert was so controversial that the Komsomol did not license any Moscow-region concerts until 1975. Daughtry, ‘Intonation of Intimacy,’ p.283.
60Sergei Chesnokov in Aleksandr Galich. Izgnanie, 32:37-32:43. ‘Vot takogo slovo—oni ozhidali, oni ushishat’ ne mogli. Ne predpologali chto eto vozmozhnost’.’
One song in particular, ‘Mistake’ (Oshibka), triggered the ire of citizens and the KGB alike. Galich wrote it in one sitting in 1962 after reading a newspaper article stating that Fidel Castro, while visiting the USSR, would be going hunting with Khrushchev on the site of a 1943 massacre near the Narva river. ‘I burned when I read it’, he later recalled. His disgust at the disrespect to veterans prompted him to write the caustic ‘Mistake’, in which fallen, long-buried soldiers misinterpret Khrushchev’s hunting bugle as a call to arms for the Motherland:

We are buried somewhere under the Narva
Under the Narva, under the Narva
We were—and not
We lie as we marched, in pairs
In pairs, in pairs
We lie as we marched, in pairs
With a collective salute!

Vechernyi Novosibirsk published a scathing review of the All-Russia Bard Concert a few days later. Nikolai Mesiak wrote, ‘I, as a soldier of Great Patriotic War, want to speak harshly about Galich’s song, “Mistake.” I am ashamed of these people, applauding the “bards” and that song. What is this mockery of the memory of the dead!’ He further argued that it was easy to criticise strategic decisions in hindsight, noting that Galich had never served in the armed forces. The KGB also did not approve. They condemned not only ‘Mistake,’ but ‘In Memory of B.L. Pasternak,’ ‘Song about a General’s Daughter,’ ‘About Comrade Paramonov,’ and others. In fact, one of the most detailed descriptions of the concert comes from Communist Party intelligence archives. These documents list who performed, what they sang, and which people were most active in discussions about the future of samodeiatel’naia pesnia. The report noted that in one set of songs, ‘Galich openly mocked the international policies of our country, ridiculing the Soviet Union’s assistance to the people of Africa.’ No doubt following suggestions from the KGB, the Writer’s Union issued a protocol recommending the ‘severe warning’ of Galich. But they also took action against other participants. Six received reprimands in their personnel files, fourteen were held up as bad examples (postavil na vid), eight were warned, and six were given severe warnings.

Even Karimov was hauled before KGB officers in 1969, supposedly to account for the Moscow KSP club’s activities. ‘Who is your ideological inspiration?’, he was asked.

63Ibid., p.99.
64Aleksandr Galich, Stikhovtorenia i Poemi, A.S. Kushner (ed.), Akademicheskiy proekt, St. Petersburg, 2006, p.74. ‘My pokhroneny gde-to pod Narvoi./ Pod Narvoi, pod Narvoi./ My pokhroneny gde-to pod Narvoi./ My byli—i net./ Tak i lezhim, kak shagali, poparno./ Poparno, poparno./ Tak i lezhim, kak shagali, poparno./ I obshchii privet!’
66Ibid., pp.609-610.
67Vsesoiuznyi Leninskii Kommunisticheskii Soiuz Molodezhi, Tsentral’nyi Komitet, No. 01/185s, 29 Marta 1968. Sekretno, TsK KPSS. Reprinted in Kushak, Antologia satiry i iumor, pp.549-556.
68Ibid., pp.555-556. ‘...Galich otkrovenno izdevaetsia i nad internatsional’noi politicheskoi nashego gosudarstva, vysmeivaia pomosh’ Sovetskogo Soiuza narodam Afriki.’
69Ibid.
Blinking in surprise, Karimov answered, ‘the city commission of the Komsomol’. Irritated, the officer declared, ‘You lie, you call him by his name and patronymic … Aleksandr Arkad’evich!’

‘Then everything was clear’, writes Karimov. ‘Here we were worried, when in fact they wanted information about Galich’.

Galich was, perhaps, too successful at spreading his message. ‘At that moment, his talent became stronger than his sense of self-preservation’, recalled Elena Bonner. The waves he made eventually caught up with him, and political pressure led him to emigrate in 1974. While he originally claimed that he would remain in Russia, his health was failing and he had no employment opportunities. He wrote poems on homecoming, including ‘When I Return’ (‘Kogda ia vernus’) and ‘The Return’ (‘Vozvrashchenie’), and even penned an essay on nostalgia before leaving in an attempt to ward it off (otnostal’girovatsia). It did not work. He always missed his homeland. Even after settling in France, he claimed, ‘I didn’t leave. They made me leave, at that time. Because I’m coming back. I will always return’.

Galich did not write much after he left the USSR, though he did perform old songs in Geneva, Berne, Brussels, and Paris. He also hosted a program on Radio Free Europe, commenting on politics and poetry. After his works were published in Russia for the first time in 1989, one headline proclaimed, ‘Galich’s Songs and Poems are Luckier than their Author—They Returned to their Homeland’. Galich never did. He electrocuted himself in France in 1977 while plugging in a new tape recorder. Conspiracy theories about this bizarre end abounded, ranging from unlucky mistake to KGB plot to CIA hit. Most consider his death accidental, but in a downright vicious obituary a Soviet periodical implied that Galich killed himself to shirk debt. The article also accused the recently deceased of drinking, debauchery, pathological tendencies, and fascism. If nothing else, the venom of the Soviet press towards someone who was both no longer writing and exiled to France points to his importance as a dissident icon.

And he remains one, today. The government Galich critiqued have dissolved, but his songs still resonate. One example of his lasting influence can be seen in discussions about the 2004 Russian action film Night Watch (Nochnoi Dozor), based on a popular novel with the same title. In an interview on radio station Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow), director Timur Bekmambetov is careful to neither confirm nor deny the allusion to Galich’s poem, ‘Night Watch’, described above. He does not claim a parallel between Galich’s warnings and the present, but the interviewer saw enough similarities between Stalin-era tyranny hobbled, not
dead, during the Thaw and the spectre of Soviet-style censorship in contemporary Russia to ask about it. Forty years later, re-cast in a vampire flick, it seems Galich’s words help some navigate postsocialist political terrain, as well.

However, any analysis of contemporary implications requires an appreciation for what Galich represented to a Soviet public. Re-framing his work in terms of oral tradition stresses the social nature of musical production, consumption, dissemination, and censorship, enriching understanding of a movement, samodeiatel’naia pesnia, which Galich helped define. Rather than simply a genre, samodeiatel’naia pesnia was inextricably linked with sociality. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Deep Purple were wildly popular in the USSR, too, and their music was also traded via magnitizat and copied lyric sheets. But hundreds of people didn’t get together in the woods and sing Beatles songs.

Relaxed regulations during the Thaw era allowed amateur songwriting to blossom, but Brezhnev’s subsequent crackdown contributed to the preference to hold campouts away from nosy neighbors and KGB watch. Just as taking away Galich’s ability to write professionally led him to focus on dissident music, depriving citizens of the option to sing songs publicly may have forced the movement further underground, out into the forest. And a tradition was born, there, that continues today. KSP campouts are still held in former Soviet states and among émigrés in Europe, North America, and Australia, even though there is no longer need to trek outside city limits to sing songs that are no longer subversive, anyway. The effort involved in enacting folksong, rather than passively listening, fostered sociality that transcended the music itself. Oral circulation did not just ferry lyrics from point A to point B; it forged social bonds. Instead of a one-way, linear artist-fan relationship, the model of samodeiatel’naia pesnia was dialogic. Galich wrote in conversation both with Soviet authorities and poets he admired. Likewise, other performers referenced him by covering his songs and writing his character into their own. Galich’s talent for nailing discrepancies between Soviet propaganda and everyday life gave his songs the edge people needed to memorise his songs and keep singing them.

Folklore is a slippery subject. Difficult to pin down, ever-shifting, it can only be captured imperfectly in recordings and jotted notes. That, though, is the secret to its endurance. It is a soothing fiction, in environments of censorship, to believe that ‘manuscripts don’t burn’. They do. And recent Russian seizures of archived photographs, memoirs, and records about the Stalinist purges prove that anything written can be erased. But you can’t destroy music, and you can’t excise memories. These physical limits of erasure allowed Galich’s music to survive, and may well be where its continuing significance lies. Only the tangible can be taken.

81KSP US Homepage, http://www.kspus.org, viewed April 27, 2009; Dornhelm and Jarrell, ‘Russian song and poetry event in the Catskills’
82See, for example, Yulii Kim’s song ‘Moscow Kitchens’ (‘Moskovskie Kukhni’).